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What's In the Air We Breathe? That's Conference Topic

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Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO—More than two score of the world's ranking experts on air pollution gather in the University of California Medical Center here today for a three-day meeting on "The Air We Breathe."

The meeting, sponsored jointly by the University of California Medical School and the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, is drawing experts from all parts of the U.S., Europe and as far away as New Zealand.

The principal topic of the series of scientific papers, panels and discussions is one word—air.

But althought the word is simple, discussing what is happening to man's most precious commodity and the most important part of his environment isn't.

Even somg, itself rapidly becoming a universal problem over the populated focuses of mankind's existence, is controversial.

Related to the problem of man's air are the problems of lung cancer, a medical subject of deadly increasing importance in the U.S. and Britain, and the effect of tobacco smoke on cancer.

(This apparently is the reason the tobacco industry has contributed $28,000 for the symposium, although UC says the money has "no strings attached.")

One important paper to be presented at the meeting will be the findings of two five year studies of lung cancer rates in New Zealand—one of the most smog free populated areas of the world.

Dr. David Eastcott, a former worker for the National Institute of Health in New Zealand, discovered, in comparing native New Zealanders and immigrants only from Great Britain, that lung cancer rates were about three times as high among the immigrants as they were in the native New Zealand population.

Eastcott's findings bear out the contention of some medical men that cigarette smoke alone is not the answer to what is causing increasing numbers of death from lung cancer in the world.

Eastcott believes that in about half of the cases, industrial air pollution was a contributing factor. English air is polluted by a record amount of coal dust and smoke and it has long been recognized that English chronic bronchitis rates far exceed those of other areas of Europe.

The New Zealand doctor cautioned, however, that the composition of English smog is different than that in Los Angeles, for example, and he hesitated to draw any conclusions for American scientists about the quality of their air.

Monday, the concluding day of the conference, will be largely devoted to a discussion of the effects of smog and cigarette smoking on the human lung.

The opposing sides of the cigarette-smog question will be represented by E. Cuyler Hammond, director of the statistical research section of the Medical Affairs Department, American Cancer Society, and Dr. Joseph Berkson, head of the division of biometry and medical statistics at the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.

Dr. Eastcott will present his paper at this concluding session.

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Cancer From Pollution?

Cancer researchers have completed a study in New Zealand which is worthy of wide consideration. It has yielded evidence that polluted air is definitely one cause of lung cancer.

The study was conducted over a ten-year period. A quarter of a million persons who moved from smoggy, industrial England into the unpolluted atmosphere of New Zealand provided the facts. These people were compared with the native New Zealanders. It was found that lung cancer was 30 per cent higher among the newcomers than among the native-born whites. The study went further and checked on Britons who went to New Zealand relatively late in life after having lived in England for at least thirty years. The prevalence of lung cancer was 75 per cent higher among them than for New Zealanders of the same age.

We have heard a great deal about air pollution but few have taken the talk seriously. We have air pollution ordinances in most of our large cities but the people who wrote them were most concerned about the soiling of the housewife line of wash. The real danger, the nurturing of cancer, has been overlooked. Generally we have underestimated the danger lurking in the smokestacks and the automobile tailpipes. Dr. David F. Eastcott, who supervised the New Zealand study, says that the conclusion is inescapable. He declares that lung cancer is a product of total environment—polluted air, smoking and infection and irritation are contributing factors.

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